**Pediculosis**
Last Revised: 09/14/2001

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Last Revised: 10/2001

# Pediculosis Capitis (aka, Head Lice)

Head lice are tiny insects that live only on people's scalps and hair. They hatch from small eggs, called nits, which are attached to the individual hairs near the scalp. The nits are plump, oval and flesh-colored. The nits are firmly attached to the hair and cannot be easily moved up or down the hair (as could specks of dandruff). Nits may be found throughout the hair, but are most often located at the back of the scalp, behind the ears and the top of the head. The eggs hatch in 7-10 days, with new lice reaching adulthood in about 10 days.

The female louse is about the size of a sesame seed, can live for 21-30 days, and lays about six to eight eggs a day. The lice live by biting and sucking blood from the scalp. Lice can survive up to 24-48 hrs. Between feedings and can do so off the body.

The major symptom of head lice is itching caused by the bite of the louse. Persistent scratching of the head and back of the neck should be viewed with suspicion. Often red bite marks and scratch marks can bee seen on the scalp and neck and a secondary bacterial infection can occur causing discharge and crusting. Swollen neck glands can also occur.

## Who gets this disease?
Contrary to popular belief, **head lice are not a sign of unclean people or homes**. They can occur at any age and to either sex. Anyone who has close contact with an infested person or shares personal items can become infested.

## How is it spread?
Lice do **not** jump or fly. They cannot be caught from grass, trees, or animals. They are spread only by crawling from person-to-person directly or onto shared personal items, such as combs, brushes, head coverings, clothing, bedding and towels. Frequent bathing or shampooing will **not** prevent lice or eliminate

them once they are established.

## How is it diagnosed and treated?

Lice are less than 1/8-inch long and are usually light brown in color. They avoid light, which makes it difficult to see them. Diagnosis is more often made by finding nits within 1/4-inch of the scalp. Nits are tiny, plump, pearl gray colored, oval-shaped specks attached to the hair near the scalp. It helps to use a magnifying glass and natural light when searching for them. The best places to look are the hair on the back of the neck, behind the ears and the top of the head. Hatched eggs can be found further out on the hair shaft and are snow-white and conspicuous.

Treatment is directed at getting rid of the lice from both the infested person and his/her surrounding and personal items. All household members and persons with close physical contact with the infested person should be examined for lice and treated if infested. Some healthcare providers may simultaneously treat all members of a household.

## Treating the Infested Person

There are several medicines to treat head lice. They are used like shampoo. Kwell Shampoo* and Prioderm Lotion* are available by prescription only. Other products such as RID*, R&C Shampoo*, XXX*, Nix and A-200 Pyrinate* are available over the counter. **All of these products must be used carefully**.

Other similar products may also be used. It is especially important to consult a physician before treating: (1) infants, (2) pregnant or nursing women, or (3) anyone with extensive cuts or scratches on the head or neck. Although these products will kill lice, none will kill 100% of the nits. Nit removal after shampooing may be time-consuming and difficult due to their firm attachment to the hair. A solution of vinegar and water may help make removal easier. Special, fine-tooth combs can be used to aid in nit removal. Most treatments require retreatment in 7-10 days. A daily nit check for the next ten days is advisable. If there is evidence of new nits (less than 1/4-inch from the scalp) or newly hatched lice, it may be necessary to repeat treatment. (Note: Unless reinfestation occurs, more than two treatments are unnecessary and can be dangerous.)

## Treating the Surroundings/Personal Items in the Child Care Center

1. Machine-wash in HOT water all washable items belonging to the day care

facility that may contain lice. Dry in a HOT dryer.
2. Nonwashables (e.g., furry toys, pillows) can be put in a HOT dryer for 20-minutes or dry-cleaned.
3. Things which cannot be washed or dried can be sealed in a plastic bag for 10-days, the duration of the life cycle of the louse.
4. Plastic items (e.g., combs, brushes) can be boiled for 10-minutes or washed with a pediculicide shampoo.
5. Rugs, upholstered furniture and mattresses should be carefully vacuumed.
6. Insecticide sprays are not recommended and can be harmful to people and animals.

## How can the spread of this disease be prevented?

1. General cleanliness at the center, as previously outlined, should be practiced.
2. Children should not share personal items such as clothing, brushes, combs, hats, etc.
3. Each child should have his/her own crib mat and should not switch.
4. Children's personal belongings should be stored separately.
5. Caregivers should learn to recognize nits and should help regularly check children's hair when there is a known case of head lice in the center.
6. If a case is identified, the center should follow cleaning procedures outlined above.

## Who should be excluded?

Infected children and persons should be excluded until initial treatment is completed and no live lice are seen.

## Reportable?

No, Pediculosis is not reportable by New Hampshire law.  However, Bureau public health nurses are available for consultation.